

First record of Rüppell's Warbler *Sylvia rueppelli* for The Gambia

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Première mention de la Fauvette de Rüppell *Sylvia rueppelli* pour la Gambie. Le 22 novembre 2006, une Fauvette de Rüppell *Sylvia rueppelli*, probablement une femelle adulte, a été observée sur la rive nord du fleuve Gambie, dans une brousse à *Acacia* près de la zone humide de Baobolon (13°28'N 15°04'W). Les caractères distinctifs sont discutés par rapport aux autres espèces du genre *Sylvia*; cet oiseau est probablement un égaré. Ceci constitue la première donnée documentée pour la Gambie.

On 22 November 2006, during a boat trip from Tendaba Camp, The Gambia, into Baobolon wetland, an area of mangrove creeks on the north side of the Gambia River (13°28'N 15°04'W), MDC heard a European Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* in adjacent dry *Acacia* scrub. After disembarking to try and locate it, MDC noticed at least four Subalpine Warblers *Sylvia cantillans* and another passerine which he was unable to immediately identify. It was grey with a contrasting dark tail and dark tertials, the latter with well-defined pale fringes. TS's first impression was of a Grey Tit-Flycatcher *Myioparus plumbeus*. However, the bird was clearly a warbler, being too compact and short-tailed for a flycatcher, and had a horizontal feeding posture. It also foraged actively in the branches, rather than adopting the hyperactive flycatching movements of Grey Tit-Flycatcher (with which MDC and TS both had previous experience). MDC concluded that it was probably a Rüppell's Warbler *Sylvia rueppelli*, a species with which he was familiar from the eastern Mediterranean. When MAC, who had an iPod with calls of European birds, played the song and call of Rüppell's Warbler, the bird, which we had temporarily lost, swiftly returned to an *Acacia* in front of us. Twice the bird disappeared but was lured back into view using playback; in contrast, there was no response from nearby Subalpine Warblers, and playback of Subalpine Warbler vocalisations evinced no response from the bird, strongly suggesting that the bird was indeed a Rüppell's Warbler, a species not previously recorded in The Gambia (Barlow *et al.* 1997, Borrow & Demey 2001). The following description is taken from notes made shortly after and before consulting any relevant literature.

Description

Overall impression was of a medium-sized *Sylvia*, smaller than Common Whitethroat *S. communis* but larger than Subalpine Warbler and structurally more like the latter, though perhaps marginally more 'chunky'. Upperparts plain ash-grey, more or less uniform from forehead and cheeks to mantle and rump. Throat pure white, cleanly demarcated from grey cheeks; breast white, becoming grey-washed on belly and flanks. Tail blackish with white in outer tail-feathers; wing-feathers greyish to dark grey, darkest on tertials and alula, with all feathers having clearly defined pale creamy white fringes, particularly well marked on the tertials. Legs rather bright pinkish brown; irides apparently brown (rather than dark/blackish) with fairly clear straw to pale brown eye-ring. Bill dark grey with pale base to lower mandible, rather heavier than typical Subalpine Warbler.

Discussion

The overall grey appearance with clean white throat and dark, pale-based bill with a subtly decurved look, coupled with rather furtive feeding action in comparatively dense vegetation indicate a *Sylvia* warbler. The complete lack of any black on the head, coupled with a lack of brown or buff in the mantle or wings made it very unlikely that it was a male and suggested an adult female Rüppell's Warbler. On return to the UK, a search of references revealed that the bird matched an individual seen at Holme, Norfolk, UK, in August 1992 (Hibberd 1992), identified as an adult female based on wing and tail features (Lewington 1992). Descriptions in Shirihai *et al.* (1996) and Shirihai *et al.* (2001) further support the identifi-

cation of the Gambia bird as an adult female Rüppell's Warbler.

Sylvia warblers are rather easily distinguished from other warbler genera, but can be tricky to separate from one another in some female-type plumages. Common Whitethroat, Tristram's *S. deserticola*, Spectacled *S. conspicillata* and Subalpine Warblers can be eliminated as they have brown on the back/wings or a buff/pink wash to the underparts. Garden *S. borin* and Barred Warblers *S. nisoria* and Blackcap *S. atricapilla* are easily eliminated by their plain face pattern without strong contrast between a pure white throat and grey cheeks. Lesser Whitethroat *S. curruca* has grey (not bright pinkish-brown) legs; Orphee Warbler *S. hortensis* has a heavier bill and lacks pale fringes to the flight feathers (in particular the obvious, well-defined pale edges to the contrastingly dark-centred tertials of the Gambian bird), whilst Sardinian Warbler *S. melanocephala* exhibits a range of features depending on age and sex, in particular a buffish-cream to reddish eye-ring, lack of an obviously dark tail and strong dusky grey or brownish wash to the flanks.

Vagrancy and possible origins

Rüppell's Warbler has a rather restricted world range, breeding in the eastern Mediterranean from the southern Balkans east to south-central Turkey and the northern Levant, and wintering mainly in Chad and Sudan (Cramp 1992, Shirihai *et al.* 2001, Aymí & Gargallo 2006). It has a circular migration route, moving south or even south-west in autumn, but returning via a more easterly route through the Middle East in spring. Vagrancy potential is proven with extralimital records in at least nine European countries, including the Faeroes and UK. In West Africa, the species has been reported exceptionally from Niger and Mali (Urban *et al.* 1997), making a record as far west as The Gambia not so unlikely. Alternatively, with proven vagrancy to Western Europe in autumn, such a bird may then move south or south-west, perhaps with Subalpine Warblers, to winter in The Gambia. Aymí & Gargallo (2006) mention that during migration Rüppell's Warbler has been recorded in loose association with other *Sylvia*;

this is frequently observed in the eastern Mediterranean, e.g. in Israel and Cyprus (MDC pers. obs.). Interestingly, of the four British records, three are from the post-breeding migration period, in August/September 1997, June 1979, October 1990 and August/September 1992 (Rogers 1993).

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